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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to compare the degree of Jewish identity felt by: Soviet immigrants and American Jews. Questionnaire respondents in each group indicated their knowledge of Yiddish and of religious customs. Spoken knowledge of Yiddish was far more common among the Soviet Jews surveyed than among the Americans. Any knowledge of Yiddish by Soviet immigrants was likely to be communicative competence, while Yiddish knowledge among the Americans tended to be receptive only. However, knowledge of religious customs was much lower in general among Soviet Jews. Awareness of Hebrew names was also lower among the immigrants, and knowledge of Hebrew was almost nonexistent, while knowledge of Hebrew was high among young Americans. In addition, awareness of Hebrew names was very high among Americans of all ages. It appeared that there is a strong sense of Jewish identity among Soviet Jews, but it is a secular identity. (Author/APM)

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Yiddish as a Measure of Jewish Identity in Soviet and American Jews

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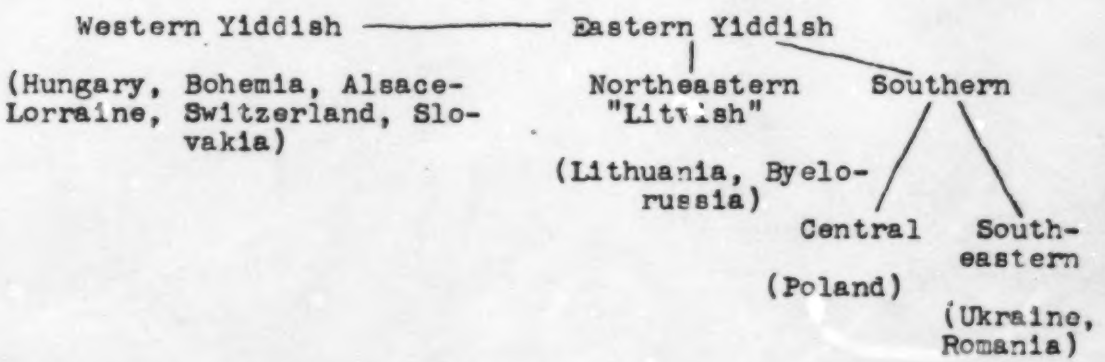
I. Yiddish and Jewish Migration

The Yiddish language is a mixture of German, Hebrew, Slavic languages, and the Jewish variants of Old French and Old Italian, reflecting changes in Jewish settlement and resettlement over many centuries. For nearly one thousand years, Yiddish was the first language of Ashkenazim, Jews whose ancestors moved from France and northern Italy to the Rhineland, beginning in the ninth and tenth centuries. From the fourteenth century on, anti-Semitism accompanying the Crusades and the Black Death forced Jews to leave their towns along the Rhine and flee south and east into central and eastern Europe. A majority settled in Poland, where they were welcomed as a merchant class and protected by government statute. Others settled in Latvia and Lithuania, near the Baltic Sea, and the Ukraine and Romania farther south and east of Poland. By the nineteenth century, Yiddish was divided and sub-divided into four dialects, each phonologically and lexically distinct:



In the late nineteenth century, anti-Semitism increased in Russia, and severe limitations were placed on Jewish settlement. Jews

were confined to the Pale, an area known today as the Ukraine, Moldavia, and Byelorussia, where they were subjected to frequent government-sanctioned pogroms. Russian Jews responded by leaving the Pale of Settlement in great numbers from the 1880's to the 1920's, taking with them to their new homes their religion, their culture, and their language. Of those who left, 90% emigrated to the United States. With the destruction of German and Polish Jewry during the Holocaust, the two largest concentrations of Yiddish-speaking Jews today are in the United States and the Soviet Union. World-wide, there are five million speakers of Yiddish; however, for most Jews today, Yiddish is a second language, and one which has steadily lost ground during the twentieth century. American Jews today are overwhelmingly English speaking; Soviet Jews, Russian speaking.

Soviet Jews have been emigrating to the West in large numbers since 1973, when the Soviet Union relaxed exit restrictions for those wishing to go to Israel. (Permanent exit visas are granted by the U.S.S.R. only for Israel, with a very few exceptions; therefore, regardless of final destination, most Jews now leaving the Soviet Union state that they are leaving for Israel.) One half of the Soviet Jews who have come to this country live in New York City, while the rest have settled primarily in large and medium sized cities throughout the United States. About five thousand former Soviet citizens are currently living in the Northeast section of Philadelphia.

II. Jewish Identity in the U.S.S.R.

Residents of the U.S.S.R., no matter what their religious

background, are subject to intense anti-religious propaganda. All students in Soviet institutions of higher education must study a subject entitled "Scientific Atheism." Religious observance is discouraged, and very few Soviet citizens of any religious heritage have been able to maintain their traditions unscathed by societal and governmental pressure. Soviet Jews coming to the United States do, however, have a strong consciousness of themselves as Jews. This is in part because the Soviet Union regards them as a separate ethnic group in an ethnically pluralistic country, and requires that they be identified on their internal Soviet passports as Jews. There is also a tradition of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, particularly in the area of the former Pale of Settlement, which became more intense following the Israeli Six-Day War in 1967; this, too, has led to a sense of self as Jews who must rely on each other against a hostile environment. Finally, Jewish traditions are not so easily discarded, being in many cases home-based and handed down from parents to children, rather than relying for transmittal on religious institutions outside the family. Nevertheless, American Jews to whom all Jewish tradition is important have often been shocked and disappointed to find out how much knowledge of Jewish religious and cultural practices has been lost to Soviet Jews under Communist rule. Efforts have been made, both in Philadelphia and other American cities, to improve the feeling of Jewish identity among the recent arrivals from the U.S.S.R. Many educational programs have been developed, aimed at children and their parents, to improve awareness of the Jewish holidays and religious practices.

III. Yiddish and Religious Observance as Measures of Jewish Identity

As lack of Jewishness in Soviet immigrants is often decried, but has not been well defined, I thought it would be interesting to contrast American Jewish and Soviet Jewish knowledge of Jewish cultural and religious practices, particularly knowledge of Yiddish, which was for so long the mother tongue of Ashkenazic Jewry. Other Jewish practices selected as questionnaire items for this study were more specifically religious in nature. Subjects were asked to define three words associated with Jewish ceremonies which can be performed by the family:

1. shiva (a traditional seven-day period of mourning that follows the funeral of a close relative and is observed in the home).

2. chometz (leaven or leavened food banned during Passover).

3. tashlich (a ceremony celebrated on Rosh Hashanah, which consists of assembling along the banks of a running stream, reciting Micah 7:18-20 and penitential prayers, and shaking one's garments as if casting one's sins into the water to be washed or swept away).

The words were given in what I believed to be ascending order of obscurity, from least to most obscure. Subjects were also asked to state whether they themselves performed two religious activities which can easily be observed by the individual at home, and to say whether their parents and grandparents had

also observed these customs:

1. Candle lighting on the Sabbath (sanctification of the Sabbath as ordained in the Fourth Commandment).

2. Fasting on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Finally, subjects were asked what their Hebrew names were, an important note of Jewish identity, but not necessarily religious identity, and were asked two questions regarding knowledge of Hebrew. Hebrew study was until recently limited to boys, and was carried on in religious schools apart from the home. With the exception of the two questions about Hebrew, the questionnaire items were selected to minimize the effect of Soviet discouragement of overt religious practice outside the home. Subjects were also asked their age to test the hypothesis that both knowledge of Yiddish and knowledge of Jewish religious practice would increase with the age of the respondent. Other questions asked where they, their parents, and their grandparents were born, in order to see how many of the American Jews were descended from persons from the same areas as the Soviet Jews now entering the U.S.

IV. The Study and its Results

Subjects: fifty eight Soviet immigrants to Philadelphia, who arrived during late 1980 and early 1981, were given the questionnaire (Russian version attached). 17% were in their twenties, 35% in their thirties, 28% in their forties, 12% in their fifties, 9% in their sixties. Forty nine American Jews, all born in the United States except for one person originally from Israel, were given the questionnaire in English version (attached).

23% were in their twenties, 21% in their thirties, 20% in their forties, 22% in their fifties, 14% in their sixties.

Geographical Origin

Soviet Jews

51% from the Ukraine (primarily the cities of Kiev, Odessa, and Kharkov), 9% from Byelorussia (primarily Minsk), 9% from Moldavia (primarily Kishinev), totalling 69% from the traditional Russian areas of Jewish settlement.

16% from the R.S.F.S.R., or Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (primarily Leningrad and Moscow).

15% from other areas of the U.S.S.R. (primarily Latvia, Lithuania, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan).

Soviet Immigrants' Parents

69% from the Ukraine.

14% from Byelorussia.

12% from Moldavia.

5% from R.S.F.S.R.

Soviet Immigrants' Grandparents

46% from the Ukraine.

22% from Byelorussia.

14% from Moldavia.

3% from R.S.F.S.R.

15% from Latvia, Azerbaijan, Poland, Lithuania.

While not all knew the place of birth of parents and grandparents, one can see movement of the youngest generation away from the historical Pale to Leningrad and Moscow at the heart of the Soviet Union; however, also evident is the continuing concentration of Soviet Jewry in the traditional settlement

areas, particularly the Ukraine. A greatly reduced percentage of younger Jews in Byelorussia may reflect the devastation caused by Nazi persecution during World War II in this area, which had been a center of Jewish settlement prior to the war.

The vast majority are from the area where the southeastern dialect of Yiddish is spoken, with a heavy admixture of Slavic. One of our agency's staff members, who speaks the same dialect, once remarked that the Yiddish of an immigrant from the far western Ukraine near Hungary was "too much like German; very elegant, but not really Yiddish."

American Jews

48 out of the 49 born in the U.S.; 71% in Pennsylvania; 29% in New York, Ohio, or Massachusetts.

American Jews' Parents

63% from U.S.

19% from Russia.

10% from Poland.

3% from Lithuania and Romania.

5% from Austria, Hungary, France, or Palestine.

American Jews' Grandparents

54% from Russia.

17% from Poland.

10% from U.S.

9% from Lithuania, Latvia, Romania.

10% from Austria, England, Hungary, or Turkey.

Well over half of the American Jews surveyed share a common background two generations back with the Soviet Jews surveyed.

Knowledge of Yiddish

		20's	30's	40's	50's	60's
Speak Yiddish	U.S.A.	--	10%	40%	55%	71%
	U.S.S.R.	30%	40%	50%	86%	100%
Understand only	U.S.A.	50%	40%	40%	27%	--
	U.S.S.R.	--	15%	13%	--	--

Spoken knowledge of Yiddish is far commoner among the Soviet Jews surveyed than among the Americans. Any knowledge of Yiddish at all by the Soviet immigrants is likely to be communicative competence, while Yiddish knowledge among the Americans tends to be receptive only. Yiddish as a useful living language is much stronger in the Soviet group. Most younger American Jews stated that Yiddish was used in their homes only to discuss things not for their ears.

Knowledge of Religious Customs

		20's	30's	40's	50's	60's
Shiva	U.S.A	91%	80%	100%	100%	100%
	U.S.S.R.	--	25%	25%	29%	40%
Chometz	U.S.A.	64%	40%	80%	100%	71%
	U.S.S.R.	--	15%	--	29%	40%
Tashlich	U.S.A.	46%	--	30%	27%	43%
	U.S.S.R.	--	5%	--	14%	40%
Candles	U.S.A.	18%	10%	40%	55%	43%
	U.S.S.R.	10%	20%	19%	14%	--
Candles (parents)	U.S.A.	36%	40%	60%	73%	86%
	U.S.S.R.	20%	25%	19%	29%	80%

		20's	30's	40's	50's	60's
Candles (grandparents)	U.S.A	91%	70%	90%	91%	100%
	U.S.S.R.	70%	70%	56%	57%	100%
Yom Kippur	U.S.A.	91%	30%	90%	100%	86%
	U.S.S.R.	10%	20%	50%	29%	100%
Yom Kippur (parents)	U.S.A.	55%	70%	100%	91%	86%
	U.S.S.R.	40%	55%	75%	71%	100%
Yom Kippur (grandparents)	U.S.A.	91%	30%	90%	100%	86%
	U.S.S.R.	80%	90%	63%	71%	100%

Note: all "don't know" answers were treated as "no" answers.

The results of this section confirmed my hypotheses that shiva was the best known custom, and tashlich, the least. This was true among American and Soviet Jews both; however, the level of knowledge was much lower in general among Soviet Jews. The Americans in their twenties were more knowledgeable than those in their thirties; with this exception, knowledge of customs increased with the age of respondents for both groups. Sabbath and Yom Kippur observance also increased in frequency with age and with distance in time through the generations. Shiva, as a rite of passage for the dead, is almost universally known to American Jews. Some Soviet Jews thought it was a religious school, no doubt from the similarity to the word "yeshiva." Quite a few American Jews were more observant of Sabbath and Yom Kippur customs than their parents. Many Americans expressed embarassment at not knowing what tashlich was. No Soviet Jews expressed feelings of discomfort over their lack of knowledge. One man added a note to his questionnaire explaining that the Soviet government was responsible for forbidding Jews to practice

their religion. However, as stated earlier, all of the items were selected because they could be observed without the knowledge of the government or other Soviet citizens.

Knowledge of Hebrew and Hebrew (Jewish) Name

		20's	30's	40's	50's	60's
Hebrew name	U.S.A	91%	90%	80%	73%	100%
	U.S.S.R.	60%	15%	19%	43%	60%
Read or speak Hebrew	U.S.A	73%	50%	60%	27%	14%
	U.S.S.R.	--	--	--	14%	--

Many more American Jews than Soviet Jews knew their Hebrew names. Some Soviet Jews responded, "I don't know," indicating that they had been given one. The Hebrew name is used on ceremonial occasions, such as weddings, funerals, and participation in synagogue services. Its use is therefore less private than public, and could cause problems in the Soviet Union. It is also associated with the use of spoken Hebrew at such ceremonial occasions, inserted into prayers and set formulas. Knowledge of Hebrew was non-existent among the Soviet Jews surveyed, with the exception of a person who had lived in Israel and learned Hebrew there. Knowledge of Hebrew among American Jews increased as age decreased, probably reflecting increased opportunities in recent years for girls to study Hebrew. (More women than men were respondents to the American study.)

V. Conclusions

A sense of Jewish identity appears to be strong among Soviet Jews; however, it is secular identity, as evidenced by knowledge

of Yiddish, a secular language learned at home and used precisely because Hebrew was once considered too sacred for any but religious uses. Religious knowledge is much less widespread among Soviet Jews than among American Jews, although there is a general decline in religious knowledge and practice among younger American Jews as compared with older generations. There are some exceptions among the youngest American and Soviet Jews; in the latter's case, perhaps because they are of the generation of the "thaw" following the death of Stalin.

Since the birth of Israel and the rise of Hebrew as an everyday Jewish language, interest in Yiddish has declined even further. While the decline is evident among Soviet Jews as well as American Jews, Yiddish is more alive in the Soviet Union than in the U.S. For Soviet Jews it is a symbol of unity in the face of a hostile social environment, and a sign of Jewish identity in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual society where the use of other languages than the dominant one is not considered strange. If Yiddish is to survive as a living language, its future is far more likely to lie with the Jews of the Soviet Union than with the monolingual Jews of America.

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Анкета

1. Возраст
2. Место рождения:
3. Место рождения родителей
   отца:
   матери:
4. Место рождения дедушек и бабушек
   Деда по отцу:
   Бабушки по отцу:
   Деда по матери:
   Бабушки по матери:
5. Умеете ли Вы говорить / читать / писать на идиш?

   (нужное подчеркнуть)
6. Если умеете, где и от кого научились?
7. Что такое „цимес"?
8. Что такое „хомец"?
9. Что такое „тащлих"?
10. Зажигаете ли Вы свечи в пятницу вечером?
    Делали ли это Ваши родители?
11. Делали ли это Ваши дедушки и бабушки?
11. Поститесь ли Вы в Йом-Кипур?
    Постились ли Ваши родители?
    Постились ли дедушки и бабушки?
12. Как Ваше древнееврейское имя?
13. Умеете ли Вы читать на иврит?
14. Умеете ли Вы говорить на иврит?

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Age

2. Place of birth

3. Parents' place of birth

   Father:

   Mother:

4. Grandparents' place of birth

   Father's father:

   Father's mother:

   Mother's father:

   Mother's mother:

5. Do you understand/ speak/ read/ write Yiddish? (Circle any that apply.)

6. If so, where did you learn Yiddish and from whom?

7. What is "shiva"?

8. What is "chometz"?

9. What is "tashlich"?

10. Do you light candles on Friday evening?

    Did your parents? Your grandparents?

11. Do you fast on Yom Kippur?

    Did your parents? Your grandparents?

12. What is your Hebrew name?

13. Do you read Hebrew?

14. Do you speak Hebrew?